

Beyond the Frontier

By RANDALL PARRISH

A Romance of Early Days in the Middle West

Author of "Keith of the Border," "My Lady of Doubt," "The Maid of the Forest," etc.

SYNOPSIS.

Adèle is a Cheesapeake, a belle of New France, is among conspirators at her uncle's house. Cassion, the commissaire, has called her Uncle Chevet's and against La Salle. D'Artigny, La Salle's friend, offers his services as guide to Cassion's party on the journey to the wilderness. The uncle informs Adèle that he has betrothed her to Cassion and forbids her to see D'Artigny again. In Quebec Adèle visits her friend, Sister Celeste, who brings D'Artigny to her. She tells him her story and he vows to release her from the bargain with Cassion. D'Artigny leaves promising to see her at the dance. Cassion escorts Adèle to the ball. She meets the governor, La Barre, and bears him the commissaire's letter to D'Artigny. D'Artigny's delect to the ball has been recalled, but he gains entrance by the window. Adèle informs him of the governor's words to Cassion.

La Barre and Cassion, enemies of Adèle and haters of her protector, Rene d'Artigny, visit a frightful tragedy on this brave little girl—one which marks her for life—all unbeknownst to Rene. How she meets the great sorrow, with what courage she faces a future that looks forever dark, is described with keen sympathy in this installment.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

(Adèle, hiding in a dark room with D'Artigny, is caught eavesdropping on the governor as he conspires with rascals to steal her heritage and is brought into the open. He questions her.)

"I do not know, monsieur."

"Who was here when you came in?"

"No one, monsieur; the room was empty."

"Then you hid there, and overheard the conversation between Colonel Delguard and myself?"

"Yes, monsieur. I confessed, feeling my limbs tremble."

"And also all that has passed since Monsieur Cassion entered?"

"Yes, monsieur."

He drew a deep breath, striking his hand on the desk, as though he would control his anger.

"Were you alone? Had you a companion?"

I know not how I managed it, yet I raised my eyes to his, simulating a surprise I was far from feeling.

"Alone, monsieur? I am Adèle la Chesapeake; if you doubt, the way of discovery is open without word from me."

His suspicious, doubting eyes never left my face, and there was sneer in his voice as he answered.

"Bah! I am not in love to be played with by a witch. Perchance 'tis not easy for you to lie. Well, we will see. Look within the alcove, Cassion."

The commissaire was there even before the words of command were uttered, and my heart seemed to stop beating as his heavy hand tore aside the drapery. I leaned on the desk, bracing myself, expecting a blow, a struggle; but all was silent. Cassion, braced, and expectant, peered into the shadows, evidently perceiving nothing; then stepped within, only to instantly reappear, his expression that of disappointment.

"No one is there, monsieur," he reported, "but the window is open."

"And not a dangerous leap to the court below," returned La Barre thoughtfully. "So far you win, mademoiselle. Now will you answer me—"

"The door opened and a lean priest in black robe entered."

"It is useless for me to reply, monsieur," I answered with dignity, "as it will in no way change your decision."

"You have courage, at least."

"The inheritance of my race, monsieur."

"Well, we'll test it then, but not in the form you anticipate." He smiled, but not pleasantly, and resumed his seat at the desk. "I propose closing your mouth, mademoiselle, and placing you beyond temptation. Monsieur Cassion, have the lieutenant at the door enter."

As though in a daze I saw Cassion open the door, speak a sharp word to one without and return, followed by a young officer, who glanced curiously at me, even as he saluted La

Barre, and stood silently awaiting his orders. The latter remained a moment motionless, his lips firm set.

"Where is Father Le Guard?"

"In the chapel, monsieur; he passed me a moment ago."

"Good; inform the pere that I desire his presence at once. Wait! know you the fur trader, Hugo Chevet?"

"I have seen the man, monsieur—a big fellow, with a shaggy head."

"Ay, as savage as the Indians he has lived among. He is to be found at Eclair's wine shop in the Rue St. Louis. Have your sentries bring him here to me. Attend to both these matters."

"Yes, monsieur."

La Barre's eyes turned from the disappearing figure of the officer, rested a moment on my face, and then smiled grimly as he confronted Cassion. He seemed well pleased with himself, and to have recovered his good humor.

"A delightful surprise for you, Monsieur Cassion," he said genially, "and let us hope no less a pleasure for the fair lady. Be seated, mademoiselle. Your marriage is to take place tonight."

"This affair is no longer one of affection; it has become the king's business, a matter of state. I decide it best for you to leave Quebec; ay, and New France, mademoiselle. There is but one choice, imprisonment here, or exile into the wilderness." He leaned forward staring into my face with his fierce, threatening eyes. "I feel it better that you go as Monsieur Cassion's wife, and under his protection. I decree that so you shall go."

"Alone—with—without—Monsieur Cassion?"

"One of his party. 'Tis my order also that Hugo Chevet be of the company. Perchance a year in the wilderness may be of benefit to him, and he might be of value in watching over young D'Artigny."

Never have I felt more helpless, more utterly alone. I knew all he meant, but my mind grasped no way of escape. His face leered at me as through a mist, yet as I glanced aside at Cassion it only brought home to me a more complete dejection. The man was glad—glad! He had no conscience, no shame. To appeal to him would be waste of breath—a deeper humiliation. Suddenly I felt cold, hard, reckless; ay! they had the power to force me through the unholy ceremony. I was only a helpless girl; but beyond that I would laugh at them; and Cassion—if he dared—

The door opened, and a lean priest in long black robe entered noiselessly, bending his shaven head to La Barre, as his crafty eyes swiftly swept our faces.

"Monsieur desired my presence?"

"Yes, Pere le Guard, a mission of happiness. There are two here to be joined in matrimony by bonds of Holy church. 'Ve but wait the coming of the lady's guardian."

"The regular, monsieur?" he asked.

"By order of the king," returned La Barre sternly. "Beyond that it is not necessary that you inquire. Ah! Monsieur Chevet; they found you then? 'Tis hereby ordered that you accompany Commissaire Cassion to the Illinois country as interpreter, to be paid from my private fund."

Chevet stared into the governor's dark face, scarce able to comprehend, his brain dazed from heavy drinking.

"The Illinois country! I—Hugo Chevet?"

"Tis some joke, monsieur?"

"None at all, as you will discover presently, my man. I do not jest on the king's service."

"But my land, monsieur; my niece?"

La Barre permitted himself a laugh. "Bah! let the land lie fallow; 'twill cost little while you draw a wage, and as for mademoiselle, 'tis that you may accompany her I make choice. Stand back; you have your orders. He stood up and placed his hand on Cassion's arm. "Now, my dear Francois, if you will join the lady."



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through such representative as I see here."

"Pere le Guard is chaplain of my household."

"And as want to your will, monsieur. 'Tis known in all New France he is more diplomat than priest. Nay! I take back my word, and will make trial of his priesthood. Father, I do not love this man, nor marry him of my own free will. I appeal to you, to the church, to refuse the sanction."

The priest stood with fingers interlocked, and head bowed, nor did his eyes meet mine.

"I am but the humble instrument of those in authority, daughter," he replied gently, "and must perform the sacred duties of my office. 'Tis your own confession that your hand has been pledged to Monsieur Cassion."

"By Hugo Chevet, not myself."

"Enough of this," broke in La Barre sternly, and he gripped my arm. "The girl hath lost her head, and such controversy is unseemly in my presence. Pere le Guard, let the ceremony proceed."

"Tis your order, monsieur?"

"Ay! do I not speak my will plainly enough? Come, the hour is late, and our king's business is of more import than the whim of a girl."

I never moved, never lifted my eyes. I was conscious of nothing, but helpless, impotent anger, of voiceless shame. They might force me to go through the form, but never would they make me the wife of this man. My heart throbbed with rebellion, my mind hardened into revolt. I knew all that occurred, realized the significance of every word and act, yet it was as if they appertained to someone else.

I felt the clammy touch of Cassion's hand on my nerveless fingers, and I must have answered the interrogatories of the priest, for his voice droned on, meaningless to the end. It was only in the silence which followed that I seemed to regain consciousness, and a new grip on my numb faculties. Indeed I was still groping in the fog, bewildered, inert, when La Barre gave utterance to a coarse laugh.

"Congratulations, Francois," he cried. "A fair wife, and not so unwilling after all. And now your first kiss."

The sneer of these words was like a slap in the face, and all the hatred, and indignation I felt seethed to the surface. A heavy paper knife lay on the desk, and I gripped it in my fingers, and stepped back, facing them. The mist seemed to roll away, and I saw their faces, and there must have been that in mine to startle them, for even La Barre gave back a step, and the grin faded from the thin lips of the commissaire.

"Tis ended then," I said, and my voice did not falter. "I am this man's wife. Very well, you have had your way; now I will have mine. Listen to what I shall say, Monsieur le Gouverneur, and you also, Francois Gouveneur. By rite of church you call me wife, but that is your only claim. I know your law, and that this ceremony has sealed my lips. I am your captive, nothing more; you can rob me now—but mark you! all that you will ever get is money, Monsieur Cassion, if you dare lay so much as a finger on me, I will kill you as I would a snake. I know what I say, and mean it. You kiss me! Try it, monsieur, if you doubt how my race repays insult. I will go with you; I will bear your name; this the law compels, but I am still mistress of my soul, and of my body. You hear me, messieurs? You understand?"

Cassion stood leaning forward, just where my first words had held him motionless. As I paused his eyes were on my face, and he lifted a hand to wipe away drops of perspiration. La Barre crumpled the paper he held savagely.

"So," he exclaimed, "we have unchained a tiger cat. Well, all this is naught to me; and Francois, I leave you and the wilderness to do the taming. In faith, 'tis time already you were off. You agree to accompany the party without resistance, madame?"

"As well there, as here," I answered contemptuously.

"And you, Hugo Chevet?"

The giant growled something inarticulate through his beard, not altogether, I thought, to La Barre's liking, for his face darkened.

"By St. Anne! 'tis a happy family amid which you start your honeymoon, Monsieur Cassion," he ejaculated at length, "but go you must, though I send a file of soldiers with you to the boats. Now leave me, and I would hear no more until word comes of your arrival at St. Louis."

We left the room together, the three of us, and no one spoke, as we traversed the great assembly hall, in which dancers still lingered, and gained the outer hall. Cassion secured my cloak, and I wrapped it about my shoulders, for the night air without was already chill, and then, yet in unbroken silence, we passed down the steps into the darkness of the street. I walked beside Chevet, who was growling to himself, scarce sober enough to clearly realize what had occurred, and so we followed the commissaire down the step path which led to the river.

Vaguely I comprehended that I was no longer Adèle la Chesapeake, but the wife of that man I followed. A word, a muttered prayer, an uplifted hand, had made me his slave, his vassal. Nothing could break the bond between us save death. I might hate, despise, revile, but the bond held. This thought grew clearer as my mind readjusted itself, and the full horror of the situation took possession of me. Yet there was nothing I could do; I could neither escape nor fight, nor had I a friend to whom I could appeal. Suddenly I realized that I still grasped in my hand the heavy paper knife I had snatched up from La Barre's desk, and I thrust it into the waistband of my skirt. It was my only weapon of defense, yet to know I had even that seemed to bring me a glow of courage.

We reached the river's edge, and halted. Below us, on the bank, the blazing fire emitted a red gleam reflecting on the water, and showing us the dark outlines of waiting canoes, and seated figures. Gazing about Cassion broke the silence, his voice assuming the harshness of authority.

"Three canoes! Where is the other? Huh! if there be delay now, someone will make answer to me. Pass the

word for the sergeant; ah! is this you, Le Claire?"

"All is prepared, monsieur."

He glanced at the stocky figure fronting him in infantry uniform.

"Prepared? You have but three boats at the bank."

"The other is below, monsieur; it is loaded and waits to lead the way."

"Ah! and who is in charge?"

"Was it not your will that it be the guide—the Sieur d'Artigny?"

"Sacre! but I had forgotten the fellow. Ay! 'tis the best place for him. And are all provisions and arms aboard? You checked them, Le Claire?"

"With care, monsieur; I watched the stowing of each piece; there is nothing forgotten."

I found myself in one of the canoes, so filled with men any movement was almost impossible, yet of this I did not complain, for my Uncle Chevet was next to me, and Cassion took place at the steering oar in the stern. To be separated from him was all I

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"With care, monsieur; I watched the stowing of each piece; there is nothing forgotten."

I found myself in one of the canoes, so filled with men any movement was almost impossible, yet of this I did not complain, for my Uncle Chevet was next to me, and Cassion took place at the steering oar in the stern. To be separated from him was all I

word for the sergeant; ah! is this you, Le Claire?"

"All is prepared, monsieur."

He glanced at the stocky figure fronting him in infantry uniform.

"Prepared? You have but